





## IGNITION

CLIFFORD RILEY

### SCHOLASTIC INC.

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND SYDNEY MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

### CLASSIFIED!

# UNLOCK A TOP SECRET FILE ABOUT THE CAHILLS' DEADLIEST ENEMY —

### THE VESPERS!

- 1. The seven Rapid Fire stories each contain a fragment of a code.

  Collect the fragments in order to assemble a complete ten-digit code.
- 2. Go to www.the39clues.com.
- 3. Click on "My Cards."
- 4. Enter the ten-digit Rapid Fire code to unlock a digital card and Top Secret Vesper file!

The code fragment for this story is: S

Are you ready to save the world?



### Contents

Cover

Title Page

Code Page

**Ignition** 

Copyright



#### The Start of the Clue Hunt

Ian Kabra had charm, wealth, and stunning good looks. But he couldn't move one stubborn cow out of the middle of the road. He didn't understand it. The beast just stood there blocking the way with a dumb expression on its face, chewing its disgusting green cud. Ian grew more furious with each *chomp mash chomp* the cow made. He had places to be and people to judge. There was no room in his schedule for staring down dirty quadrupeds.

"Livestock isn't nearly as stubborn in England. It must be the American blood," his little sister, Natalie, scoffed from the seat beside him. Her black silk funeral dress gave her an air of confidence beyond her eleven years. The dress seemed perfectly designed for her. In fact, it *had* been designed for her — in Paris.

"All right, Giles," Ian called out to the chauffeur as he glanced down at his Rolex watch. "It's time for drastic measures. Get out, and push the beast over to the side of the road." The black BMW sedan that the Kabras reserved for their visits to the States sat purring in the narrow road, surrounded by cattle. The midday heat billowed like a mirage off the hood of the car.

"Me, Master Ian? Push the cow?" Giles groaned and opened the driver's side door.

As Ian watched the chauffeur trudge over to the animal, Natalie turned the knob up on her personal A/C vent with a vengeance.

"Ugh! This humidity is simply horrid," she whined. After a moment of dramatic fanning, she looked over at Ian and asked, "Do you think Grace left the estate to Amy and Dan? Those sad little orphans were her favorites, after all."

"The *estate* is beside the point. I'm not entirely sure there will even be a will reading. All I know is Mum said we need to keep an eye on Amy and Dan," Ian replied.

"What could those two really do with such a large house, anyway?" Natalie wondered. "Not that I care. We already have a mansion. But it seems so odd to just give one away to poor people." Natalie shrugged, then pushed the DOWN button on the power windows and stuck her head out. "Giles, tell that blasted cow that if it doesn't get out of the way soon, I'm going to have it tanned by our man in Tuscany — and I'm not talking about *suntanned!*" Natalie yelled.

It wasn't long before the Kabras were back on the road, and what looked like endless farmland to Ian rushed by in a dizzying blur of sun-soaked blues and greens.



The car glided to a smooth stop along the gravel drive in front of Grace's mansion. Ian heard the crunch of the small stones beneath his feet as he stepped out of the car. Catching the low rumble of distant thunder, he looked up to the vast stone gables of Cahill Manor. Rows of enormous windows along the face of the mansion reflected the overcast sky spreading out over the rolling hills and forests of the estate. Weathered spires and gargoyles lining the roof glared down over the drive. The mansion loomed in all its glory from the top of a hill at the center of the grounds. It was an impressive sight, and for a moment, Ian almost forgot he was in a country where it was acceptable to wear blue jeans to the opera and people ate pizza with their hands.

The heat of the day settled quickly onto Ian's shoulders, though summer storm clouds were building in the east. A low hum sounded from the manor as a light breeze moved around its vast stone walls.

Ian buttoned his double-breasted silk suit and walked over to Natalie.

The two Kabras strode down to the family graveyard, which was ringed by a small forest. The grounds were covered with guests. At least four hundred people stood in and around the graveyard, waiting for the funeral to begin. Grace had a very large and international family. They were all Cahills, in one way or another, though they didn't always carry the surname. There were Brazilian, French, and Australian Cahills. There were high-ranking diplomats, Nobel prize—winning scientists, and famous artists in every branch of the family. But Ian never understood how they didn't all dress in a manner befitting their status. His eyes traveled over to the Starling triplets who, despite being genius inventors, couldn't seem to think beyond khakis and argyle.

Sinead, Ned, and Ted Starling were all sixteen, and from what Ian's mother had told him, formidable opponents.

"Hello, Natalie. Ian," Sinead said, grinning as she walked up to them. "I see your jet didn't crash while crossing the Atlantic."

"Was it supposed to?" Ian asked.

"Not this time," Sinead responded sweetly. "Though I hope you have your designer life vest ready for the return trip." The triplets shared an oddly diabolical laugh between themselves, and strode off in their matching khakis and loafers.

Turning back to the grave site, Ian noticed Alistair Oh, a distant Korean uncle of theirs. Some might call his diamond-tipped walking stick bling. Ian called it *tacky*.

Natalie was looking around for someone to talk to. She had already eliminated their immediate choices: an old woman wearing a tiara who was standing near them with a monkey on one shoulder and an iguana on the other, and a toddler sitting on the ground attempting to eat handfuls of grass.

"Let's go chat with the minister," Natalie suggested. "He might actually know something useful." As Ian and Natalie trudged off, the hearse carrying Grace's casket made its way down all one hundred yards from the house to the cemetery. Ian watched it glide along the gravel drive, the reflection of the trees skimming over its glossy rooftop.

Ian felt a sense of finality rise within him, but it was joined with something else. *Sadness? Excitement? Could it even be . . . fear?* Ian wasn't sure, which was a new feeling to him, too. With his handsomeness, wealth, and social dominance, Ian had never felt unsure about anything. Ever. His mother had guaranteed that. Over the years, he'd felt the pressure of his duty, his parents' stronghanded guidance, the weight of his family legacy, but never insecurity.

"Hey!" Ian suddenly heard someone yell from the procession line. He looked over just in time to see Dan Cahill get flipped upside down by the Holt sisters, Madison and Reagan. The child bodybuilders had grabbed hold of one leg each, and Dan was swinging like a blond-haired bat in store-bought funeral clothes.

"Look, guys," eleven-year-old Madison said. "We caught a rat!" Dan was wriggling and throwing punches into the air, trying to get free, but his tie kept flapping in his face. *And* this *is my competition?* Ian laughed.

The rest of the Holt family — Hamilton and their parents, Eisenhower and Mary-Todd — jogged up in formation, wearing matching purple tracksuits. Ian wondered how they could possibly manage to don uniforms every day, looking like the waitstaff of that horrid excuse for a restaurant, McDonald's. More important, he wondered where Amy was. That mangy bookworm was always with her little brother. It was rather sweet, like the runt of the litter protecting the deranged one.

Then he saw her. Amy's face had gone pale, and she appeared to be stammering, as usual. The Holts were laughing at her. Ian's mum, Isabel Kabra, said weakness should *always* be laughed at. Well, the Holt family was doing a fine job.

The girls finally dropped Dan, and Ian turned his attention back to the minister. Natalie must have been employing her interrogation training, since he looked a little frightened of her. Indeed, he looked scared of everyone. He kept wiping his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief and looking anxiously back and forth. Ian knew he should probably call her off. It was unlikely the poor fellow knew anything useful.

Ian looked back to Amy and Dan. Ian's mother said they posed the greatest threat, though Ian still couldn't believe it. The two siblings could barely dress themselves. How could *they* ever become the most influential people in the world?

The funeral procession ended, and Reverend Niblocke, probably in an attempt to get away from Natalie, asked everyone to be seated. Ian dragged his sister over to the row behind Amy and Dan, trying to remain close to them.

"Well, any success?" Ian asked his sister.

"No," Natalie replied in a huff. "He has a border collie named Moses, but that's all I got." Ian snickered.

"Shut up!" Natalie said. "Loads of help you were. All you could do was stare at that fashion tragedy show, Amy and Dan. Now we have to sit behind them." She shuddered. "I hope we don't catch something."

As they took their seats, Ian noticed an African American woman in the row behind them, dressed in a black sweaterdress, which was pilly and bookish looking. A floral silk scarf around her neck added some color, but her glasses didn't even have designer frames. *It's frightening, the kind of riffraff that sneak into these things*, Ian thought. But then Amy flicked her reddish-brown hair over her shoulder from the seat in front of him as she blew her nose, and Ian snapped back to reality. It was time to focus. Everything he'd been training for — all the plans the Lucians had spent centuries scheming — it all led up to this.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the surprisingly fragrant colonial air. It was a beautiful day for world domination.

Mummy will be so proud!



Jonah Wizard sat down in the front row and waved to his fans across the grave plot. A group of girls over there was going gaga for him. They all had on Wizard tees from his last concert in Toronto (the bedazzled special-edition ones) and had drawn his tag sign on their cheeks in black eyeliner — funeral appropriate. Jonah smiled his best gangsta smile at the girls. *I have the most dedicated fan base ever*:

"Dad." Jonah turned to his father in the seat beside him. "Make sure those girls get third-anniversary Jonah Wizard mugs, okay?"

"Mugs." Broderick Wizard tapped into his BlackBerry. "Got it!"

Jonah looked back to the crowd, searching for Amy and Dan Cahill. Everyone knew they were Grace's favorites. She had probably given them inside information. Jonah had to find a way to take care of those little nobodies before they could take advantage of their head start. *But where were they?* 

"Son," Jonah's dad interrupted his thoughts, "did you call the producer of The *Really Late Show* back? They want to have you on for *Gangsta Life*."

"Book it for me," Jonah answered distractedly, scanning the crowd.

There must have been over four hundred people at the funeral. Jonah knew crowds. He was the world's biggest pop/hip-hop star under age seventeen. He'd been filling sports stadiums, amphitheaters, and mega music halls since he was twelve years old. This many people in one place invigorated him. But why more people at the funeral weren't noticing him confused Jonah a bit. Didn't they know his new album, *Gangsta Life*, had just premiered at number three on the French music charts?

Then he spotted Amy and Dan. Amy was in a black dress with a little collar that kept flapping up against her cheek in the breeze. But she didn't seem to care. She just kept staring ahead with a blank look on her face. And Dan was slumped over in his chair, kind of leaning against Amy. Even though they needed a major upgrade in the swagger department, Jonah knew he had to keep an eye on them. He might be the most talented performer of his age, but if his mom was right, he was about to get the

chance to become something *much* bigger. He wasn't gonna risk it over a couple of kids who couldn't even rhyme a couplet if the beat hit 'em on the head!



During the service, Rev. Niblocke kept glancing over at the Kabras, then back down at his watch. Sweat dripped from his forehead. *Man, someone should teach him about stage presence*. Jonah thought. *Grace would have been asleep by now, if she weren't already dead!* 

Jonah had to admit that he didn't know Grace that well, but he remembered her as a pretty nice lady. She once showed him her vast music archive, full of first-pressing records and ancient sheet music. Original manuscripts from Bach to 2Pac lined the shelves of her music library. Grace had taste. There was no arguing with that.

Soon after the reverend finished, a five-star general got up to read a speech about Grace's life. Then a president from some foreign country that Jonah had never heard of began gesturing wildly and speaking in a language Jonah didn't recognize. With the clouds looming overhead and the light breeze rippling through the trees ringing the graveyard, the funeral was turning into a real showstopper. Jonah had to hand it to Grace. She really knew how to go out with a bang.

When the speakers had finished, six Nobel Peace Prize winners got out of their seats and walked toward Grace's casket in tight formation to lower it into the ground. Then men in matching black suits invited the guests to stand by row and toss a shovelful of dirt on the coffin.

Jonah was called first. He rose, strutted over to the grave, picked up the shovel, and tossed a clump of dirt onto her casket. Before he finished, he made sure to wave heartily to the funeral crowd. Seconds later, he was tackled by girls wearing WE ♥ THE WIZ-IZA-IZA-IZARD! commemorative free-trade T-shirts.



Professor Astrid Rosenbloom watched in shock as Jonah Wizard, the famed hip-hop star, almost drowned in a sea of teenage-girl admiration. Nothing seemed to be making any sense today. Not the weather, not the funeral service, and *certainly* not the guests.

Astrid had been invited to Grace Cahill's funeral just yesterday by a man claiming to be Grace's lawyer, William McIntyre. Of course she had agreed to come. Grace Cahill's death had left Astrid with too many questions.

Though William's last-minute phone call was strange enough, Astrid was certainly not prepared for what she found at Grace's funeral. It wasn't just the number of people claiming to be relatives — hundreds, if Astrid had to guess — but the great diversity among them startled her. As a Harvard professor, Astrid had come to learn a great deal about differences of opinion and background. She was an expert at handling eccentric scholars, overbearing parents, and high-maintenance benefactors. You name it, she'd dealt with it masterfully. But *this*. This was a circus.

The wealth and self-assurance that permeated the crowd was astonishing. Earlier, an elderly Korean gentleman had strode past her carrying a diamond walking stick — that he wasn't even using! Astrid adjusted her glasses for a better look around. At the end of her row, a blond woman with a twitching eye appeared to be arguing with a squirrel. *In Russian*. But before Astrid had a moment to take it in, the woman flicked her wrist at the animal, which stopped it dead in its tracks. *Did she just poison a squirrel with her fingernails?* Astrid shook her head in confusion.

The only people besides herself who didn't seem to fit in were the two children sitting a few rows in front of her. Even the woman with a monkey on her shoulder seemed more at home in this crowd. Based on Grace's description of her beloved grandchildren, Astrid guessed that these two were Amy

and Dan Cahill. The boy had dark blond hair and kept swinging his legs back and forth under his chair. *Just like Atticus*, Astrid thought, thinking of her son, who had turned nine a few weeks ago.

Amy sat primly in her seat, but looked shattered by Grace's passing. While everyone around them gossiped and chattered, Amy and Dan just sat quietly, gazing at the earth where Grace now lay. It was as if those two children were the only people who knew what a funeral was for — who knew what it meant to miss someone.

After the services finished, the mourners had lined up, row by row, to toss a shovelful of dirt onto Grace's grave. Astrid sat this part out. She hadn't known Grace for too long and it seemed inappropriate to help bury her.

It took nearly an hour for each guest to throw in their shovelful of earth. The sky was almost completely overcast now, and the wind had picked up. But no one had left yet. All the relatives were sticking around for something. There was a feeling of nervousness, of anxiety in the air. Groups of families gathered together and almost sneered at others. For all the knowing looks that were being exchanged, Astrid thought she might as well have been in a Roman court during a plot to overthrow the Caesar. She felt her own body tense with anxiety. William McIntyre walked up to the podium next.

"Thank you all for coming," he said gravely. "I am William McIntyre, Madame Cahill's lawyer and executor."

A light murmur began to spread across the crowded graveyard.

"If you will look inside your programs," McIntyre continued, "some of you will find a gold invitation card." The murmuring deepened as hundreds of people shuffled through their programs.

Some ripped theirs open, and Astrid could see plumes of paper rising above the crowd.

"Sacré bleu! This is impossible!" a man with a curly mustache exclaimed.

"There must be some mistake!" another woman whined from the back of the crowd. Curses were yelled all over the graveyard as guests discovered they had not received an invitation. The woman sitting next to Astrid tried to steal a card from a child when her parents weren't looking.

"Thief!" the little girl yelled, and a fight broke out. Even those who *did* receive invitations were greedily lording them over less fortunate relatives.

Astrid didn't look inside her program. But someone jostled her from behind and a gold card fell from Astrid's program down to the grass beneath her chair. She picked it up and turned it over.



Astrid's mouth dropped open. It was impossible. There must have been some mistake. She checked her name at the top of the card twice more. The invitation was clearly addressed to her. *But why?* 

The crowd had now fully fallen into a roar of complaints and angry shouting. Apparently, a great majority of the guests had not received a golden invitation card, and the painful truth of being left out was hitting them hard. Amidst the hubbub, Astrid stole a glance at Amy and Dan in front of her. For the first time all afternoon, they were smiling.

"I assure you," William raised his voice above the yelling, "the invitations were not done randomly. I apologize to those of you who were excluded. Grace Cahill meant you no disrespect. Of all the members of the Cahill clan, only a few were chosen as the most likely."

"Most likely to what?" Dan piped up.

"To be the beneficiaries of Grace Cahill's will. Now, if you please, those with invitations will gather in the Great Hall."

Beneficiaries?

McIntyre had said nothing about a will reading. This was not part of the plan.



The Great Hall was exactly that: great. The room was extremely large and echoed like a Roman amphitheater. Which was appropriate, because rows of armor, swords, and other weapons lined the walls. Some were so large, like the jousting spears, that they reached almost to the ceiling. The colored panes in the tall stained-glass windows, at once vibrant, would shift quickly to darker shades, then back again. Astrid supposed it was an effect of the darkening clouds passing by overhead.

The chosen family members began filing into the room. Some looked surprised to be there and eagerly took a seat. Others, like a group of triplets, walked around haughtily, as if this sort of thing happened to them every day.

"I'm so very pleased you could make it, Astrid," William said, startling her. "And I know Grace would be very happy to see you here."

"Thank you, William," Astrid answered. "But I don't understand why I've been included in all this. Are you sure there hasn't been some mistake?"

William smiled. "After this meeting, you and I can talk in private. The legacy Grace gave you is special, and so requires special attention. The following presentation is not for you, but Grace wanted you to see it anyway. Please wait here for me until after everyone has left."

"But —" Astrid started to protest before William cut her off.

"All will be explained," he said, then turned and walked resolutely up the aisle to the front of the room.

William seated himself behind a desk to face his audience. Behind him hung what looked like a projection screen, similar to the kind Astrid used in her classes. There were about forty people in the room, and most had taken their seats, eager to learn of their inheritance. Astrid stepped farther back into the corner, not wishing to be seen by any of the family members. William McIntyre swiftly pulled a piece of paper out of a brown leather folder and began to read:

- "I, Grace Cahill, being of sound mind and body, do hereby divide my entire estate among those who accept the challenge and those who do not." A call rang out from a man in a purple tracksuit, asking for clarification, but William quieted him. He cleared his throat and continued reading:
- "'You have been chosen as the most likely to succeed in the greatest, most perilous undertaking of all time a quest of vital importance to the Cahill family and the world at large.' "The room erupted into questions, all of them directed at William.

Yet a few people didn't seem startled. The Russian-speaking woman was whispering something into the Korean man's ear. And a well-dressed boy and girl, presumably siblings, exchanged a knowing look. A woman in a black pantsuit stood up and yelled over the crowd.

- "'Perilous undertaking'?" She wore an enormous gold medallion around her neck, and it swung vigorously as she threw her hands up in the air. "What is she talking about, McIntyre?"
- "Cousin Ingrid —" He began to calm her down. Murmurs spread through the crowd in response to the woman's questions.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please," William called out. "If you will direct your attention to the screen, perhaps Madame Cahill can explain things better than I." The room settled into a hush and, as if on

cue, the light outside darkened through the stained glass. Grace appeared on the illuminated screen.

Her beauty was the first thing Astrid saw. Even at nearly eighty, Grace's mirth and spirit shone through. She was dressed in a black gown and was sitting up in bed with a cat in her lap. Her illness must have kept her bedridden toward the end, but her cheeks were pink and her hair was styled into voluminous white curls.

"Fellow Cahills," Grace said. "If you are watching this, it means I am dead, and I have decided to use my alternate will. No doubt you are arguing amongst yourselves and giving poor Mr. McIntyre a hard time about this contest I have instituted." She smiled into the camera. "You always were a stubborn bunch. For once, close your mouths and listen."

The same man in the purple tracksuit protested again, but his wife shushed him before he had time to get a full sentence out. Astrid looked for Amy and Dan. But then Grace continued:

"I assure you, this contest is no trick. It is deadly serious business. Most of you know you belong to the Cahill family, but many of you may not realize just how important our family is. I tell you the Cahills have had a greater impact on human civilization than any other family in history."

Oh, God! This is what Grace was trying to explain to me. Five hundred years of Cahills and . . .

"My relatives," Grace continued, "you stand on the brink of our greatest challenge. Each of you has the potential to succeed. Some of you may decide to form a team with other people in this room to pursue the challenge. Some of you may prefer to take up the challenge alone. Most of you, I'm afraid, will decline the challenge and run away with your tails between your legs. Only *one* team will succeed, and each of you must sacrifice your share of the inheritance to participate." Astrid watched Grace hold up a manila envelope sealed with a wax stamp. Grace's eyes were brilliant and hard as she stared again into the camera.

"If you accept, you shall be given the first of thirty-nine clues. These clues will lead you to a secret, which, should you find it, will make you the most powerful, influential human beings on the planet. You will realize the destiny of the Cahill family. I now beg you all to listen to Mr. McIntyre.

Allow him to explain the rules. Think long and hard before you make your choice." Grace paused and gave the camera one last long look before she concluded.

"I'm counting on you all. Good luck, and good-bye."

Then the screen went dark.

Grace's image stayed in Astrid's mind for several seconds. Grace was really gone. The storm clouds outside had finally broken, and heavy raindrops pounded against the stained-glass windows of the Great Hall. Astrid tried not to feel alone, but she couldn't help thinking that this was not how it was supposed to be. *Grace promised to help*.

Astrid looked for Amy and Dan first as her eyes adjusted to the light. She found them sitting toward the front of the room on the far side. Amy's face was wet with tears, and her cheeks glistened in the shifting light of the room. Her brow was furrowed, and Dan put his arm around her slumped shoulders. She kept staring at the screen where Grace's image had been just moments ago, blinking back tears.

The Great Hall had once more erupted into shouts, jeers, and angry questions. One after the other, the squabbling group of relatives asked William what it all meant.

"Now, if I might be able to finish—" he began again.

"But what's this about sacrificing our inheritance?" an older woman who bore a slight resemblance to Grace complained. "Where's the money? It's just like my sister to come up with some foolishness!"

"Madam," William said, "you may certainly decline the challenge. If you do, you will receive what is under your chair." In a hurried rush, forty people reached beneath their seats. Astrid gasped as the gentleman in the tracksuit picked up one daughter's chair and turned it over — with her still clinging to it.

"What you now hold," William explained, "is a bank voucher. It shall only be activated if and when you renounce your claim to the challenge. If you so choose, each of you may walk out of this room with one million dollars and never have to think of Grace Cahill or her last wishes again. Or . .

. you may choose a clue — a single clue that will be your only inheritance. No money. No property. Just a clue that might lead you to the most important treasure in the world and make you powerful beyond belief —" William paused, and seemed to look directly at Dan Cahill with his cool gray eyes "— or it might kill you. One million dollars or the clue.

"You have five minutes to decide."



Amy Cahill hadn't looked at her bank voucher since Mr. McIntyre explained the challenge, not even once. The weight of the day, the finality of Grace's passing, seemed to have fastened her to the seat.

The momentary joy of being handed a million dollars startled Dan out of his grief. And Amy's little brother bounced up and down beside her like a kangaroo in a jumping contest. Astrid could only imagine that the siblings would have different ideas about which choice to make. One minute your life is normal — tough, but normal — and the next minute someone comes along offering you a million dollars!

No doubt, Dan was thinking of all the things he could get with all that money. Atticus, if Astrid had to guess, would invest it so he could buy an ancient sarcophagus. He was an extremely bright child and had been fascinated by mummies since he could walk.

Across the Great Hall, most people she could see were taking the money and leaving. Some had fainted in their seats, and family members were doing their best to revive them. More still were in complete shock — and barely able to smile — even after they'd counted all the zeros on their checks. Cousin Ingrid took the money early and rushed out, the stomping sound of her heavy black boots echoing across the hall. Eventually, almost everyone left clutching their million-dollar vouchers with both hands.

Except for a small few. The purple tracksuit family, the preppy triplets, the Russian woman, the man with the diamond cane, Jonah Wizard, and the glamorous brother and sister had stayed to take the challenge. Only Amy and Dan remained undecided. But Dan wasn't bouncing anymore. He sat closely with Amy, and they were talking.

The other six teams seemed ready for the challenge — almost as if they had expected it. And each of them looked better suited to take it on. If they weren't wealthy, they seemed self-assured, or at the very least had a large enough family to make up a team. But Amy and Dan were by themselves, and looked so small in such a grand room as they huddled together to make their decision. Astrid felt pangs of anger rising inside her as she thought of Grace knowingly and willingly putting them through this mission. Dan couldn't have been much older than Atticus, and Astrid would never think to involve him in something so big and perilous. What was Grace thinking, exposing them to so much danger?

But just then, Amy and Dan stood up and walked over to the table. Amy said something to William, then picked up his lighter and set the two vouchers on fire.

They were in.



After William distributed the first Clue, each team ran off in a different direction. The Russian woman was the first to leave. She folded the Clue into her purse and slinked out the door. Then the preppy triplets hastily agreed on a plan and almost tripped over their chairs on their way out. Jonah Wizard's father finished typing on his BlackBerry before he followed his son in a hurry. After the rich-looking children strode confidently to the door, the tracksuit family double-timed it out of the Great Hall with their pit bull trailing behind them.

Once the Great Hall was clear, William McIntyre and Astrid headed for Grace's office. They could hear footsteps pounding frantically in the floors above them. Somewhere a dog was barking and a man's voice yelled, "Troops! Fall in line! One, two, three, four. And one, two . . ."

Astrid and William crossed through the dark, musty-smelling billiards room, and turned into a narrow hall. A round of crashing sounds rang out above them.

"My God, they're ransacking the place!" Astrid exclaimed.

William stopped and looked up, then back at Astrid. "Of course," he answered, shaking his head. It was strange to hear his voice sound so tired when just a few moments ago Astrid had watched him command a room full of some of the most powerful people in the world. "The clue hunt has begun, and no amount of fine china will stand in its way."

Finally, they made their way into Grace's office. Everything except the green carpet and leather-topped desk was made out of intricately carved wood. Rain slid gently down the panes of a small window. The room smelled sweet and heavy, and Astrid couldn't help but feel comforted.

William offered Astrid the seat in front of the desk, and took Grace's chair for himself. No sooner had she sat down than William was ready to begin.

He leaned forward intently. "Astrid, what do you know about the Vespers?"

To hear the name *Vesper* from someone besides Grace sent a chill down Astrid's spine. It made them all too real. She took a deep breath and began:

"When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to tell me stories about a clan of very bad people. An insidious group, almost like ghosts, who moved silently through history wreaking havoc. But there was also a group called the Guardians, who fought the Vespers whenever they could."

"Yes, go on," William encouraged, tilting his head in closer.

"I forgot most of my grandmother's stories. And those that I did remember, I took for old war tales. She was a spy in World War II, you see. But then Grace called. She explained to me that she believed the Vespers were still active — in fact, stronger than ever — and that I might be the last living Guardian."

William sat back. "That was indeed a difficult day for Grace. She wanted so much for it not to be true," he said. Astrid shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"I, too, was skeptical at first, but the more Grace described the Guardians and their five-hundred-year struggle against the Vespers, the more my grandmother's legends felt like truth. After our first conversation, I did some research on the Vespers. My findings confirmed their existence — or at least traces of them throughout history." She swallowed and took a deep breath. "I called Grace immediately. I had no idea . . . I mean, I never thought . . ."

Astrid paused to collect herself. William reached across the desk to comfort her.

"She was getting sicker every day then, but she calmed me down. 'You're not alone, Astrid,' Grace had said. 'I will help you for as long as I can. And then there will be my family . . .'

"So I proceeded with my research," Astrid continued resolutely. "But the more I uncovered, the more I was appalled. I didn't want to believe it. And after Grace's death, I even tried to bury the truth inside myself. I didn't think I could handle it."

"But you agreed to come to the funeral when I called," William said. "Why?"

"Well —" Astrid hesitated. "Toward the end of Grace's sickness, I began to feel that I was being followed. And it seemed to get worse after her death. I would be shopping at the grocery store and look over to see a woman staring at me. Or a man sitting on a bench looking at me funny while I walked my dog in the park. And once I . . ." She trailed off, embarrassed at how paranoid she sounded.

"It's happening sooner than I expected," McIntyre murmured.

"What is?" Astrid's eyes grew wide as she leaned over the desk.

William met Astrid's gaze, concern — or was it *fear* — written on every feature of his face. "They're coming for you, Astrid. You're the only Guardian left. We haven't seen the kind of activity you're describing in decades. No. This is a full-out offensive, and they won't stop at you."

Astrid felt like she was going to faint, no, vomit. She was going to throw up. Right there in Grace's office, on the day of her funeral. This couldn't be happening.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Astrid snapped. "I didn't sign up for this. I don't know the first thing about fighting this, this" — Astrid searched for the words — "this evil."

There was a long pause as she caught her breath. "I'm sorry," Astrid apologized. "This is a lot to take in."

"I know, Professor Rosenbloom. *I'm* sorry to have been so abrupt," William responded. Astrid began rubbing her temples. She took another deep breath.

"Please tell me," she asked in a measured voice, "that the people I saw today are *not* the other 'family' members Grace thought would help me after she was gone."

William was silent.

"You've got to be kidding me!" she exclaimed. "All I see is a family consumed by greed and jealousy. Why on earth would Grace institute a competition, of all things, at a time like this?" Astrid was out of breath and feeling more hopeless with every passing moment.

"We must trust Madame Cahill," William began carefully, "to have made the best decision for all of us. I know it's hard to believe in her choices, but Madame Cahill was one of the cleverest people I have ever known. She had strong faith in her family. Though splintered, I think she hoped the clue hunt would produce a new leader of the Cahills. One to unite them all against the Vespers."

"That's an extraordinary risk!" Astrid interrupted.

"Yes, it's true. There is no way of knowing if her plan will succeed, but I learned over the many years I spent working with that great woman, that if she had a plan, then I should follow it."

A spark of hope instantly entered Astrid's thoughts. "William, you said you had a 'legacy' for me, right? What was it? I always assumed Grace would leave me all her files on the Vespers. That will at least give me *something* to start with!"

"Yes. Yes, she did," William confirmed, then reached down to unlock a desk drawer. He brought out a thin, unmarked file and handed it to Astrid. "This," he explained, "is all the information Madame Cahill and I compiled on the Vespers before her death."

Astrid leafed through it. There wasn't much: a list of names, a few photographs. No step-by-step instructions on how to fight a band of ancient evil adversaries. No "How to Save the World Guide." Astrid's shoulders felt very, very heavy all of a sudden.

"It is grossly incomplete," William continued, "and I apologize. But hopefully it is enough for you to start with."

Astrid looked up at him and almost laughed. There was no place to start. She felt like someone had just pushed her off a very high and rocky ledge. Astrid gripped her chair as she searched for thoughts to piece together — something, anything that might help this all make sense.

Just then, a moan sounded from within the wall opposite Grace's desk.

They hurried over and put their ears against the wood. A voice on the other side whispered a muffled, "Help!" William stood up and rushed out of the room into the hallway. Astrid followed close behind.

"There's a broom closet next to the office," William explained as he wrenched open a door in the hallway. Inside, a woman lay bound and gagged, shoved up against a mop and a pile of rags.

"Ingrid!" William exclaimed. The lawyer untied the handkerchief that was used to gag her and began working on the bindings at her hands and ankles. When Ingrid's face was bare, Astrid recognized her at once. But her medallion was missing.

"You were at the will reading, weren't you? What happened?" Astrid questioned. The woman coughed as she tried to speak. Her first few words were muffled.

"Never made it," Ingrid said. "... was trying to use the bathroom ... *cough* ... before the presentation, but couldn't find it. I was searching ... *ack cough!* ... this hallway when I ran into myself. I mean — a version of myself. She was ... *cough* ... waiting for me."

"Do you mean someone was disguised as you, Ingrid?" William asked. Ingrid nodded, then fell into another fit of coughing.

"She ripped off my necklace and said, 'Tell them the Vespers are watching.'"

"My God!" Astrid gasped. She turned to William. "It can't be!" They stared at each other with wide eyes, knowing instantly how devastating the breach was. An enemy agent had infiltrated not only Grace's funeral, but the will reading and launch of the Clue hunt. The Vespers knew everything.

They each grabbed an arm to lift Ingrid out of the closet when a pungent smell wafted down the hallway.

Was that . . . *smoke*?



Hamilton Holt watched in horror as the flames crept up Grace's dining room drapes and thought, *What have I done?* 

Just an hour ago, the Holts had received their Clue:



After leaving the Great Hall, the Holt family had regrouped in the atrium garden, a greenhouse-like room at the center of the mansion. The roof was one big skylight, and the room was three stories high, with balconies from the other floors looking out over the garden below. The Holts were debriefing near a small reflecting pool as a stone statue of a nymph looked on.

"Sir, I suggest we start in Grace's library," said Hamilton. "Grace had a lot of old books, and I don't think we'll find a better set of resources!"

Eisenhower, who was not a great reader, gave his son a blank stare. Hamilton tried again. "Er, 'Richard S.' could be the author of something with 'fine print,' sir. You know, like, a book? The old ones—"

Reagan cut in. "Dad, permission to report!"

"Permission granted," Eisenhower responded, turning to his daughter.

"Well, during our visit last winter, Grace gave me a tour of the portrait hall, to show me our ancestors. There were definitely lots of plaques with tiny writing on them underneath the pictures. Maybe one of them was this Richard S. guy — one of our relatives! I think we should check there first."

"Excellent reconnaissance, Reagan," Eisenhower approved. "Hamilton, try to be more inventive next time. Okay, troops, FALL IN!"

Reagan shot a smirk at Hamilton. The Holts jumped quickly into formation. "Arrf!" Arnold barked and scrambled over behind Mary-Todd. Together they jogged up to the portrait hall in the west wing.

The room was long, connecting the north and south corners of the western-facing side of the house. The hallway was flooded with the dark, shifting light of the storm. A long row of tall windows faced out onto the lake. Opposite the windows was a wall stretching the length of the hall, and it was covered with family portraits.

As the Holts read over each and every plaque, Arnold barked at the family dogs that had been painted alongside their famous owners. Cahills from over five centuries stared out at the Holts from their gold-framed portraits. There was Luke Cahill, Gustave Eiffel, Thomas Edison, Marie Curie, Neil Armstrong, Sacagawea, even LeBron James. But no Richard S. And just when Hamilton was going to suggest looking in the library again, Madison piped up.

"Dad! I mean, sir! We should try the china room. There are all those fancy dishes with the fine print on them! That's definitely where we'll find Richard S., I just know it!" Madison exclaimed.

Eisenhower nodded. "Fall in line, troops!" he called again, and set their marching beat. "One, two, three, four . . ."

In Grace's china room, every wall was covered in porcelain. Some were commemorative pieces, while others seemed to have been handed down through the generations. There were curio cabinets made of glass filled with ancient porcelain teacups and silver spoons. The Holts read almost every line of fine print on every piece of china, and found nothing.

Hamilton shook his head in frustration. "Dad, I feel very strongly that we should —" But Hamilton was interrupted by the tinny ring of a plate bouncing along the carpet. The Holts spun around just in time to see the plate crash into the wall.

"Arnold!" Mary-Todd yelled. "Bad dog. Very bad dog!"

The pit bull whimpered a little and wrapped his tail between his legs. As Hamilton's mother continued to yell at him, Arnold backed into a curio case, sending it toppling over. All the china came crashing out, splintering into a thousand little pieces. The noise was earth-shattering. And it spurred Arnold into a frenzy, barking like mad and racing around the room, knocking over case after case.

Madison and Reagan screamed at every new broken plate. Then Mary-Todd started screaming at the girls to quiet down. A wave of thunder cracked outside.

"Stop screaming!" Eisenhower belted out. "Fall in, troops! Show some composure!" But it was several minutes before the noisy waterfall of barks, screams, and splintering china ceased.

"This is ridiculous!" Eisenhower said to his family of troops, almost breathless now. "There are no clues here, and I'll be spittooned if I waste my time in this house for much longer. Move 'em out!"

Hamilton jogged along behind his father as they entered the formal dining hall on their way out of the manor. Halfway across the room, Eisenhower stopped and everyone behind him screeched to a halt. Even Arnold ran into the back of Reagan's leg, and let out a surprised yelp.

"Ham!" Eisenhower called behind him. "Step forward!"

"Yessir," Hamilton answered, and walked up beside his father.

"Hamilton, I don't want to leave any traces behind, nothing our competition can use. Take this lighter and set those drapes on fire. We'll flush our enemies out empty-handed," Eisenhower commanded.

- "But, Dad —" Hamilton protested.
- "No buts!" Eisenhower cut him off. "This is a direct order, son. Now, take the lighter. . . . "
- "But, Dad, you just said yourself that there weren't any clues left in this house! Why do we have to burn it down? It doesn't—"

"A direct order! Just do it," Eisenhower yelled. Hamilton took one last look into his father's eyes, which were cold and resolute. Hamilton turned away, knelt down to the floor, and picked up the foot of the drape. Then he flicked the lighter open, applied pressure to the flint, and touched the small flame to the soft, velvet drapery.

As little flames grew into larger ones, Hamilton noticed the drapes were the exact same purple as their tracksuits. He would have laughed at the coincidence, if remorse hadn't already filled him with fear. He shouldn't have done it. The flames were very large now, creeping up the curtains to the ceiling, then billowing out like liquid fireworks. The whole room was quickly engulfed in fire, and an almost deafening roar rose as the flames sucked in the remaining oxygen.

"Okay, children, I believe we've overstayed our welcome," Mary-Todd said in the calmest motherly voice she could muster. But Hamilton couldn't take his place in line. His eyes were glued to the snarling fire as it raged through one of the grandest rooms in Grace's entire mansion. A scream rang out behind him.

"Reagan!" Hamilton yelled. The drapery had almost fallen on top of her in a fiery cloak. As he helped his sister up to her feet, the full weight of his actions fell upon him. And then a horrifying realization: There were still people in the house! "Fire!" He screamed the alarm at the top of his lungs. "FIRE!!"

Eisenhower stopped as soon as he heard Hamilton's warning cries.

"Ham! What are you doing?!" Eisenhower demanded. "Stop this insubordination!"

"No," Hamilton panted. Smoke was billowing down the hallway and quickly obscuring the image of his father, but Hamilton didn't remove his gaze. "I'm not letting anyone die on my watch . . . sir."

Eisenhower's jaw clenched. "I'll deal with you later, solider!" Eisenhower yelled, then turned and set a wall hanging on fire. "GIRLS!" he bellowed, tossing his daughters another lighter. "Keep spreading that fire. I want to be sure it catches. Do you hear me?" A chorus of "Yessirs!" followed Eisenhower as he marched his family out.

The mansion was becoming a smoky, fiery blur, but Hamilton kept an eye out as best he could for anyone still within the house. As they moved through the billiards room, Madison stopped quickly to light the pool tables and cues on fire. The green felt from the tabletops started popping with little sparks. Pool sticks, once neatly mounted in their cases, were splintering like matchsticks from the flames.

In the music room, Mary-Todd reluctantly set row after row of bound sheet music alight. Black smoke began billowing from the bookcases, clogging Hamilton's nose and mouth. Soon, his body was riddled with choking coughs. He struggled to call out his warnings as he dodged pianos and music stands, hoping to catch anyone left in the building. As Hamilton looked around, he could barely even see Reagan bringing up the rear. But he could hear "Troops!" being yelled in front of him. *That must be Dad*.

With the help of his family, the fire was getting really bad, really quickly. The roar of it almost deafened him as they ran past the ballroom, which his father had already set alight. Behind him, Hamilton heard the tuneless clang of something falling onto the grand piano. It sent a chill down Hamilton's spine. That couldn't have been the ceiling. *Could it?* 

The Holts were running toward the exit now, Hamilton shouting alarms as they raced through the Great Hall, where the projector screen was already engulfed in flames. Taking a left out of the Great Hall, Hamilton stopped before the grand staircase to be sure that Reagan had made it through the house safely. As soon as she turned the corner, Hamilton fell in behind her, and they raced over to the staircase.

But just as they finished descending the stairs, a section of the roof caved in, sending the upstairs dining room crashing right through the middle of the grand staircase. Hamilton turned around to watch

the last of it fall through. He heard a shrill scream, and through the smoke he saw Cousin Ingrid stuck in one of the fractured floorboards above the fiery hole left in the stairway.

Hamilton didn't have to think twice. He spun around and headed straight for the fiery pit.

"Hamilton! Ham! COME BACK!" his parents yelled. His sisters screamed behind him, but their shouts were drowned by the roar of the fire. There was no way he could get to her through those flames. He'd have to find a way to douse them if he was going to cross over the gaping hole in the staircase. He looked around for a source of water. The flowers! Grace always kept a magnificent flower arrangement in the foyer to greet guests.

Hamilton ran over to the table, grabbed the arrangement, and ripped the flowers free. He carried the vase full of water as far up the stairs as he could possibly go. The flames were as high as his waist now and obscuring his view of Cousin Ingrid. He could hear her calling to him through the fire. And her signature medallion necklace was gleaming through the smoke like a beacon, refracting the light of the flames.

Hamilton knew he didn't have much time left. He held up the vase, feeling the cool china beneath his hands. It was strange to feel something besides heat when you were inside a burning mansion. Hamilton took aim and tossed the water at the base of the worst flames.

Success! The fire sizzled out, leaving a broken path of smoking, charred wood between him and Cousin Ingrid. There was just enough room for Hamilton to get across the gap. He took a few steps down the stairs to get a running start, then leaped across the fiery hole to the stairway above. He landed safely, but teetered a little bit on the weakened beams.

After catching his balance, he quickly grabbed hold of Ingrid's ankle and began pulling it from the floorboards. But it wouldn't budge. Hamilton glanced down to get a closer look. *No wonder she's stuck!* Hamilton realized. *Why is Cousin Ingrid wearing combat boots to a funeral?* But before he could ask the question out loud, her foot popped free. The hole it left behind instantly started spewing smoke. Hamilton picked her up, just like he did his barbells while bench-pressing at the gym, leaped over the hole, and carried her to safety below the burning stairs. Together, the Holt family and Cousin

Ingrid ran outside to the front lawn. Covered in soot and coughing incessantly, everyone collapsed to the ground beside the main drive, gasping for air.

When Hamilton finally caught his breath, he realized the rain had stopped. He looked up to the burning mansion. A window burst open from the heat of the flames. Smoke spewed from every possible crack and opening, forming a deep black cloud above the manor. He could hear eaves bursting inside and the horrible yawn of collapsing beams. A sense of relief washed over him as he counted his family members. Everyone had made it out alive — he'd even saved Cousin Ingrid. He looked around. *Where is she?* 

Before Hamilton had a chance to find her, a giant crash rang out from the mansion. He turned and caught a glimpse of the massive chandelier in the foyer falling through the air. A split second later, a giant ball of fire flamed out through the front door, like a dragon exhaling its last breath. The mansion was dying.

Daylight was fading over the Attleboro hills, and the burning glow of the house bled into the sunset. Staring into the fiery ruins of Grace's sprawling manor, Hamilton had an overwhelming sense that something had just been set in motion — bigger than anything he'd ever known in his entire life. And he, Hamilton Holt, was already a part of it. It felt grand and old and absolutely unstoppable.

The hunt for the 39 Clues had begun.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011943442

Copyright © 2011 by Scholastic Inc.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, THE 39 CLUES, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

Clifford Riley would like to acknowledge Grace Kendall.

Cover design by Keirsten Geise; Rapid Fire logo design by Charice Silverman First edition, December 2011

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON · M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141 Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

e-ISBN 978-0-545-45194-9